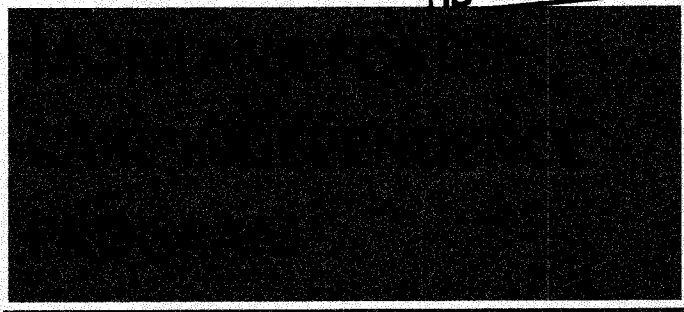




Amanda



Brendon



Michel with Sarah (TLS)



Ashley

*"Life, misfortunes, isolation,  
abandonment, poverty, are  
battlefields which have their  
heroes; obscure heroes,  
sometimes greater than the  
illustrious heroes"*

Victor Hugo

***Michel-Butte, MT***

I met my TLS, Sarah, when I was 18 1/2. I am now 21. I have spent more time with Sarah than any other person in my life. Transitional Living has kept me from being homeless, jobless, and hopeless. Sarah got me hooked up with services from Western Mental Health and she has worked closely with my mental health case manager.

Sarah has shown up for me at the hospital when I hurt myself. She has gone with me to the police station when I have been in trouble. She was a big part of my getting social security disability benefits as an adult.

Sarah has been there for me in good times and bad. She has given me encouragement and compliments when I'm being good and given me the straight honest talks I need when I was messing up.

She has been more supportive and caring about me and my future than anyone I have ever known.

The best out of our hard work is that I am not at Job Corp and already a peer counselor. Sarah is the closet I have to family. We still talk weekly and she is my biggest support.

*Schylar Canfield-Baber- Butte, Mt*

Hello and thank you for allowing me to share my story, and thank you for taking time to consider the important issues that face the Montana Foster Care Independence Program.

At the age of 6 my biological family, including my 4 year old brother, moved to Dillon, Montana from Oregon. Not long after moving here, both my brother and I were removed from our verbally, physically, and emotionally abusive family. At the time, I thought it was one of the most difficult experiences of my life. Little did I know that what was to follow would be 11 years of trials, failures, and every so often... a little triumph or success in my life.

I went through 11 foster homes, 2 group homes, and one children's home in the period of 11 years. I changed elementary schools 6 times. I changed high schools 3 times. I never had stability or a permanent place to call home. While I often used to feel that my experience in the Montana foster care system was more damaging than helping, I now realize that isn't quite the case.

There were people that were strategically placed in my path. Some were teachers, others natural role models and some were Transitional Living Specialists. While I didn't gain everything I needed to learn from any individual it was a combination of the people in my life that encouraged me to become the man I am today. But the point of my message is that without their guidance and knowledge, life would have been more difficult for me and could have ended completely different.

As those that create policy and change how our state operates, I plead with you to remember the often "forgotten" youth in our large state. We need trained and strategically placed adults in the lives of foster youth, homeless youth, or those in transition. We need them to teach our youth the basic skills of life. How to balance a check book, do our taxes, seek medical help, feed ourselves, and most of all further ourselves.

Without leaders and mentors placed in my life, I don't think I could have taken the traumas of the foster care system nor had aspirations to be anything. As I sit and write this letter, I see the faces of many people that pushed me to do better and to be better. They taught me that I didn't have to repeat the cycles of abuse and neglect. These people taught me the basic building blocks of what it means to be human and to be an adult.

I ask that as you make decisions that you think of your own children and the skills you taught them. Also think of how many times they made mistakes and you had to help them get back on their feet. This is a luxury that many Montana youth are missing out on. While the Montana Foster Care Independence Program is not the cure-all, they provide a foundation and a start for youth that otherwise would not have a direction. The people that work in these programs don't do it for the money, as you know there isn't much to go around. They do what they do, because they care for the children and their futures.

The children impacted by the Montana Foster Care Independence Program are future leaders, just like you. They dream of change, of peace, and of a future that is not full of pain or poverty...but of a future where life is peaceful, comfortable, and most of all stable. They dream of creating a life of their own, without the crutch of others, a place that they can call their own. But they have to be taught.

Today at the age of 27, I feel that I am a successful human being. I pay taxes, I have a BS in Professional & Technical Communication and am two semesters shy of completing my masters in public administration. I also hold a stable job with the Student Assistance Foundation as an Outreach Manager in Butte. Doing exactly what the Transitional Living Specialist did for me, but focused on higher education. I help students remove barriers to pursuing their dreams of post-secondary education. I feel that my job is important and vital to the students I serve. Sometimes all they need is a helping hand.

My hope is that you hear my story and realize that your decisions can change the lives of the youth that access the services of the Montana Foster Care Independence Program. Please dedicate yourselves to supporting programs that encourage youth to become self-reliant and resilient against the odds that are often stacked against them. If you have any doubts in your mind about the impact these programs have, just think of your own children and families...who will be there to guide them and provide support if you or your family weren't there? Who would guide your children and teach them the basic skills to survive? Hopefully there will always be someone or something in place to ensure the success of all Montana's youth.

Again, thank you for your time.

Respectfully,

Schylar Canfield-Baber

***Amanda-Butte,Mt***

I have been in Foster since age 6. I was in over placements while in foster care. When I aged out of care I was couch surfing with friends. I just reconnected with my Transitional Living Specialist Sarah about 6-8 months ago. Over a year ago she helped me enroll in college. However motherhood and college was too much for me to handle. I dropped out of college. I was embarrassed to reconnect with Sarah because I dropped out of college. I was homeless for 5 months with my son Gabe when I ran into Sarah again. When I ran into her, she asked me how I was doing. I told her my situation. I told her I was wondering why I was cut off food stamps, where to get housing, and where to get a job. Sarah said let's find out. Within 6 months Sarah helped me get food stamps, purchase a car, obtain housing, and obtain employment. She helped me become stable. Before Sarah I had a dead-end job, lived in a crappy place, had bad credit, and was on TANF. Sarah helped me turn that around. I now live in a 2 bedroom apartment and work full-time as a Habilitation Aid at the Butte Shelter Workshop. I help developmentally disabled adults. I am no longer on TANF and I have good credit. I even make early payments on my washer/dryer. Sarah means a lot to me. She helped me become stable. I was scared when I first had my son. I never had a safety net...a support system. My family was not in a position to help. Foster kids are intelligent people. We just don't have people to teach us. We need people like Sarah to enlighten us...to walk with us. She didn't treat me like a criminal or someone trying to get money. When the time is right, I plan on going back to college and pursuing a degree. I want to become a therapist and be an advocate for kids like me.

Ashley

I couldn't wait to get out of foster care and left care on my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. My TLS tried to get me into the Homeward bound program- but I blew it. I didn't even last one night. My TLS didn't give up on me, even though I am really, really hard to get along with.

I became homeless and was living on the streets or spending some nights in the Homeless mission.

My TLS got me into a room-it wasn't much but I wasn't on the streets in the winter. I couldn't get a job and lost my room after 4 months. My TLS worked extremely hard to get me SSDI as an adult. She found a program in Butte that pays rent for people waiting for SSDI and fought to get those funds for me. I know live in Public Housing, have some furniture, food stamps, lieap, Medicaid, and a case worker through Western M. Mental Health. Without help from my TLS, I'm afraid I would be homeless or even dead. I have no family support.

My TLS is always a phone call away. Because of my mental health problems, I am difficult for people to work with-but my TLS keeps hanging with me.

I give permission for my testimony to be shared with the Legislative Committee.

Ashely Wine

Brendon-Butte,MT

Because of my mental illness in my family and my own illness, I have not been successful since leaving foster care at 18 ½. I didn't graduate from high school. I tried living with friends and family but that didn't work.

On and off I would contact my TLS but would never follow through with what I had to do.

Recently I had to leave my grandparents home and was homeless. I wasn't taking my psych meds and wasn't eating. My anger issues were out of control. I met with my TLS and she straight-out told me that she would only help me if I became a client of Western Montana Mental Health, get back on my meds, and get a mental health case manager. She helped me get hooked up. She also helped me find a one room efficiency apartment that I can afford. She helped by getting a stipend to help with rent and heat and household needs. She even taught me how to hang curtains and clean. She took me grocery shopping and also to get some clothes so I can work for the "Workers Now" program. Since having my own place I am calmer and less angry. I feel like I can have a future. I want to go to Job Corps and know I have to live successfully on my own for 6 months to qualify. That means, staying on my med, keeping my apartment, working with my caseworker and TLS, staying out of trouble, and taking anger management classes.

I finally feel I have a plan, supports, and can hopefully heal the problems with my family.

I give permission for my testimony to be shared with the Legislature Committee.

Brendon Heim

***Rose- Missoula, Mt***

The Montana Foster Care Independence program has played a huge role in helping me get where I am today. I am a student at the University of Montana, and I'm working to get a degree in the surgical technologist program. Starting in high school, my transitional living specialist really helped me to get motivated to think about what I was going to do after high school. She continued to work with me, teaching me how to find my options, taking me to different schools for visits, helping me with applications, and teaching me skills to keep my life organized and prepare for college. Even now my transitional living specialist tells me about scholarships that I'm eligible for or internships that are of interest to me.

Other than what help I've received with getting me started with school, my transitional living specialist is also there for support in so many ways. I know that if I ever have a real problem, or maybe just need help getting to know more options about something, she can usually help, or give me some numbers of people who can. The Montana Foster Care Independence program has helped me tremendously in getting on the road to achieve my goals and it continues to foster the tools to keep me on that path.

I give Linda Cleatus permission to share this at the Legislative committee.

Thank you,

Rose Mascarenas



The Montana Foster Care Independence program has been helping me reach my goals all throughout my senior year of high school. They have helped me by paying for my summer school classes through the Lincoln center this past summer so I could pass my junior year. Anytime I have needed anything to do with my future, Stephanie Marquis always helps me out by getting what I need. She has helped me pay for my ACT testing which I take next Saturday. Last summer she set me up with HRDC so I could get experience in the nursing field. This past summer I worked at a Assisted Living home and I really enjoyed it. The program has also helped me out with information about different colleges and how much the state will help me out even after I have aged out of the system. Also this past school year I have been struggling with both of my math classes, and the state helped pay for tutoring through Sylvan Learning classes so I could get better grades in math. It has helped immensely. My grades have raised by almost a letter grade in Algebra II and a letter grade in Geometry. I am very grateful for this program. It has helped me through everything.

Thank you for having this great program to help us foster kids that are aging out of the system. Like I said it has helped me out a lot.

Thank you again,

Tasia One Bear

I give permission for my testimony to be shared with the Legislative Committee.

Tasia One Bear

***Kathryn-Billings,MT***

Hi, name is Kathryn. I aged out of foster care at eighteen. I moved to Montana shortly after to follow my college dream of attending at Montana State University of Billings. This dream almost seemed impossible because at the time I was just graduating high school with a child. I did graduate at Shepherd High School with a grade point average of a three point five. At this time of life, I needed to attend college and that is when I found the resources that I my Stephanie (Transitional Living Specialist) was able to offer.

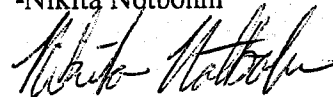
Stephanie has helped me with several of my goals as a single mom. College has been an important step in my life. I worked really hard in high school to attend the university. I am now attending my second semester and doing very well. Some other goals I have achieved with Stephanie have been; setting up a budget to save for my driver's license and vehicle. About four months ago I was able to get my driver's license. I had no idea how to drive when I left the system. An idiotic rule the system thought of, sorry. But I saved enough money to afford my license and reliable car.

I really found a lot of help through Stephanie. Coming out of foster care without parents to rely on to help with basic survival knowledge is not easy. I have been fortunate enough to use the Montana Foster Independence program and it has benefited me enormously. It would be a shame to not have this program available, especially when you exit out of care and have no one to help you with these needs to become and efficient human being.

Nikita-Helena, MT

I believe this organization has helped me in so many ways. It has helped me pay for things for school and therefore makes school (the financial part) a lot less stressful for me. Also, if I need help filling out certain papers, getting college assistance, or just helping me with life in general I can always contact Linda and she can walk me through things step-by-step. I want this organization to stay around for other people like me that need help throughout high school and even college financially. Again, things have been a lot less stressful for me because of Linda. It's nice to know that if I get stuck, I can call Linda and she can help me with situations. I have been through some rough times and the financial part can be so overwhelming. That is why I would love for this organization to stay around. I hope other foster children get the help that I get when I absolutely need it.

-Nikita Notbohm

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Nikita Notbohm', written in dark ink.

***Christina- Helena, MT***

First of all, I would like to thank you for your time to consider the issues that face the youth in the Montana Foster Care Independence Program.

As a child I was given the responsibility of taking care of my two younger siblings because our mother physically abused and neglected us. I went through foster home to foster home for 9 years, never having a place to call home. I was constantly told that I would never amount to anything and that the situation I came from would be the situation I would become. When I finally aged out of the system I was expected to know how to take care of myself.

Imagine for a moment that this is your child. What if for some reason you were unable to take care of your child; wouldn't you want to make sure that someone else would? That your child would have the opportunity to have a future? To have a fair chance at something for once?

I was never given a chance at my childhood, but because of the Montana Foster Care Independence Program and the grants I receive for school I have a fair chance at adulthood. I now attend Carroll College for Nursing. I will graduate and put my past behind me, making a better future for myself, and for one day, my children.

So I am asking you today; please give our youth a second chance for the opportunity and hope for a better future.

Thank you for your consideration and time.

Christina Herman

## Trip to Browning      Aug. 23 and 24, 2010

This trip really begins for me on 12/5/08 when I met Powers at AYA. He was a very young 17 year old who couldn't sit still, couldn't concentrate and was a challenge for staff to work with. He had 1-1 staff at that time and constantly monitored. He was not doing well in school and never did graduate from high school. I thought "Boy, this kid is going to be a challenge". When he aged out there were very few options for him and several phone conferences were held. I opposed the move to Butte because I was worried about powers and his ability to function in an adult group home in Uptown butte and even being able to navigate his way to day treatment. I have been pleasantly surprised at the progress he has made over the last year. I would have never attempted the trip to browning with the teenager I met at AYA.

On April 19, 2010, I wrote two letters to his mother and to his cousin "Aunt" informing them that Powers is living in a group home in Butte, that he is making friends walks to treatment, keeps his room clean, is attached to the house dog and wants contact with his family. I also enclosed a card for each of them that Powers had written. It was a Mother's Day Card for his mother and he told her he loved her and misses her. We did not get a response.

When I went to work on June 21, 2010, there was a message from Jeremiah Padgett wanting me to contact him because Powers' mom died on June 17. When I was able to contact him that afternoon he said they had found the letter I had sent and contacted me through the letter. We talked about going to the funeral the next day in Browning and there was not enough time to arrange that nor was Powers really in any shape to go after hearing the news. We compromised and I said I would bring him up later in the summer. Jeremiah spoke with his family and everyone was comfortable with that.

Powers' aunt (cousin) called on July 28, in response to the letter I had written in April. She apparently lives in Arizona in the winter and was back in the Flathead. I informed her of Powers' mother's death. She said she would like to write to powers through me but doesn't want anything to do with treatment or being involved with therapy. She did write a letter and I took it to Powers on Aug. 9<sup>th</sup>. I later found out from Powers that he has not seen her since he was 14 years old and sent to Texas for treatment.

Leading up to going I spoke with Jeremiah several times and realized that he was a first cousin and then he had me call his dad who is Power's uncle and half brother of Power's mother. I think there was a little surprise that there was actually going to be follow-through and a visit.

I picked up Powers on Aug 23 at 7:30 am along with my friend, Maggie, and two mini dachshunds. Powers was immediately smitten by those dogs and talked a lot about the house dog, Buddy, that had to be put to sleep the week before. For the rest of the trip it was Powers and 2 little dogs on a leash, in his lap, sneaking them treats and talking to them like they were babies.

The trip to Browning was pretty interesting. When we went through Boulder, Powers talked about being at AYA and feeling like that was the place where all his therapy "finally clicked in". In Helena he spoke about shopping and feeling self-conscious in public. When we went to the park in Choteau he asked about the grain silos and had no idea what they were and wanted his picture taken in front of them. Powers talked a lot about how his "aunt" didn't want him to have anything to do with his Native American(mother's) side of the family and that she is "very judgmental". He wondered how he was

going to tell her that he had been to visit them. It took a few tries for him to understand that he is an adult and that he can make up his own mind about who in his family he wants to spend time with is up to him. He talked about an experience he had had with his mother when a reunification was tried and she apparently was using drugs and we had a long discussion about addiction and addict's behavior.

We went directly to East Glacier to the place I was finally able to get that I thought was appropriate for a young man traveling with 2 women. We had a cute little A-frame cabin and Powers was going to sleep in the loft. He hadn't informed me that he was afraid of heights. By the time we left the next day he could easily go up and down the stairs. He fed a horse there and was very intent on pulling grass and talking to the horse. We went back into Browning and went to the Blackfoot Heritage museum. I asked him if he wanted to buy a souvenir. We talked to a young woman who was doing bead work there and she was beading pen covers. Powers decided to buy one from her and "keep it as a decoration". He also bought some post cards of Blackfoot Indians. We also stopped at the Browning Trading post and Powers bought a native American themed t-shirt and some huckleberry products.

We finally found his Uncle Johnny's which is right by the hospital. Right away you could feel the love and welcome in the family and home. There seemed to be kids and dogs everywhere...because there were. We quickly learned that Johnny and Mary have 10 kids between them. Four older children live outside of the home, two out of state, one in the service and Jeremiah in his own place in Browning. Powers' Uncle Doug (his mother's full brother) also lives in the house. Their youngest child is adopted and was cocaine addicted at birth and has ADHD. We soon learned that Aunt Mary would be home anytime but not to count on it because she is a doctor. In fact, she is the first Blackfoot woman doctor. Uncle Doug has been living with them for a year and is a recovering alcoholic...and says "I have learned a lot about the power of love from living with this family." Doug was very excited and happy to see Powers whom he hadn't seen since Powers went into care at around 6 years of age. He told Powers that his mother cried "with happiness" when she got her Mother's Day card from him and talked about her son a lot. Doug told Powers several stories about when he was little. His uncles also told him that his mother had been through treatment several times but she just couldn't beat it. They never said one negative thing about her, but talked about how much they loved their "baby sister". Jeremiah and his girlfriend showed up to visit also. Doug gave Powers a funeral card with a picture of his mother when she was young and a picture of Doug and his sister taken sometime in the last couple years. He also gave him the casket cross that was with Powers' grandmother and mother. When we were sitting around the table his Uncle Johnny said "Powers, this is home. If it ever gets to tough out there you always have a place to be here. We're family". Aunt Mary came home and she was welcoming and very gentle with Powers. She had to take the younger girls to school for orientation so we got a picture of the whole group together. The uncles took us to the cemetery to see visit her grave and Powers took pictures of the grave site. Her mother is buried next to her and her maiden name was "Powers". We left Powers at the gravesite alone for a couple minutes and when he got in the car he was crying. His uncle Johnny said "Emotion. It's a good thing Powers. I like that in a young man." We went back to the house and outside hanging out. Powers talked to his uncles about cars and wanted to sit in Uncle John's Suburban and while he was in the car his Uncle Doug came over and hugged me and thanked me for bringing Powers. We stayed til about 8 pm, left with lots of hugs all around and went back to East Glacier.

On Wednesday we took a drive to the top of Logan pass and stopped and took pictures along the way. Powers just couldn't believe how beautiful it was and we talked the formation of mountains, wildlife, and enjoying nature. On the way back I showed him where Lower St Mary's Lake because his family has land there and invited us to come back next year and go camping. We went back to Browning and met

Aunt Mary and Uncle Johnny for lunch. Powers talked to his Aunt about his thinking about fitting in and having all the latest tech stuff and thinking that will show he is "normal". Mary talked about how she never wanted to fit in and always wanted to do her own thing and that's how she got to be a doctor. Powers told them that he is going to be in Special Olympics this year and I said if he is in winter sports it is usually in Whitefish and they want to make sure they know if he goes so they can go and see him and his events. We talked about basketball and Mary is a big fan and I said if she comes down to Butte she's welcome to stay with me. She took my name and number. She also told me how special it was to have Powers come and visit. Uncle John reiterated to Powers that if he ever needs a place to be he has a home with them. More hugs all around and we were on the road again.

On the way to Choteau I asked Powers what meeting his family again meant to him: "I know more now and learned about my family and what they knew about my Mom. I never thought much about my native side and learning about how my Mom grew up was real nice. Now I know about both sides of my family. It is reassuring I have family out there who welcome me. I have other options besides my aunt's side of the family." My friend Maggie took notes while he was talking. He also expressed some anxiety about discussing the trip with his aunt and how she would react. He said repeatedly that she never wanted him to know them or be around them and that she is "very judgmental and prejudice".

The trip home was pretty long and they didn't send his 3 or 8 o'clock meds with him (even though I said we would be back late). Powers did start to escalate and at one time was really riled up about what he thinks would make him fit in...back to the cell phone, computer, techno thing again. But he also brought up things about being in a group home and going out in public and feeling different. He felt that staff made it too obvious that the kids were in group homes "you can't buy that you're only on level 2 or you're on blue level you can't have that". He said he wished it was more like normal...where you're told you're grounded. It was really quite a tirade, but he did settle down and we managed to make it home. When we got to the group home and the staff asked him how his trip was he said "excellent" and she said "I can see that...you're just beaming" and he was.